

Book Review: *Failing Sideways: Queer Possibilities for Writing Assessment*

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“Is there anything we are not failing at when it comes to education in the United States?” This is the tantalizing question that opens *Failing Sideways: Queer Possibilities for Writing Assessment* by Stephanie West-Puckett, Nicole I. Caswell, and William P. Banks. Conversations regarding the numerous failures, real or perceived, of the U.S. education system abound in the 2024 political and social spheres.

This award winning [\[1\]](#) text brings together scholarship on educational measurement, writing studies, and queer rhetorical theories to disrupt prevailing deficit models and rethink what failure can mean for our discipline and our students (p. 25). West-Puckett, Caswell, and Banks ask us to imagine a multidimensional assessment model, where each individual facet of the model can be twisted, turned, and rotated according to the lens through which we would like to view a particular piece of writing. They describe their new assessment model as being most like the Pyraminx®, a tetrahedron (think pyramid) version of a Rubik’s cube. They ask writing students, teachers, and administrators alike to sluff off the residue of the overworked and underthought 2D flat models that we use today, models

which never truly fit any kind of multifaceted human communication, and to consider putting their multidimensional model — the “Queer Validity Inquiry (QVI) Pyraminx” — to work instead. Each face of their QVI Pyraminx represents a particular diffractive lens through which the assessor will approach the object being assessed.

West-Puckett, Caswell, and Banks offer *Failing Sideways* as a way off of what they call the “educational failure-go-round” (p. 6). These author-scholars, writing program and/or writing center administrators themselves, have crafted

the clarion call for other writing program/writing center scholars, administrators, teachers, and tutors to fold up and throw into the recycling bin the ubiquitous, two-dimensional, often unhelpful, and frequently empty assessment practices employed in nearly every higher educational institution across the country.

They present their proposed assessment model as an important departure from the tried and untrue assessment binary of success/failure, wherein work is deemed as a success or a failure, rather than acknowledging and addressing that “failures” are often symptoms of disenfranchisement (p. x). They argue that instead of looking at assessment through a vertical frame – top to bottom, successful to failing – educators, in particular those who assess writing, would better encourage learning if they were to envision a more horizontal movement. According to the authors, “failing sideways” is accepting that in failure we often learn and grow more than if we had succeeded in the vertical success/failure frame. They point out that it is from these constant acts of failure that our perspectives / purviews / point-of-views shift slightly to the left or right rather than up or down.

They also introduce what they call Queer Validity Inquiry (QVI) where they encourage assessors to look through four lenses – failure, affect, identities, & materiality – that are distinctly different from current, Western, industrial-capitalist assessment lenses, which they identify as “success, commodification, reproduction, and mechanization” (p. 27). This reframing leads to their informative and interest-piqueing title *Failing Sideways: Queer Possibilities for Writing Assessment*.

Coupling their new QVI model and calling on José Esteban Muñoz’s (1999) theory of disidentification[2], West-Puckett, Caswell, and Banks assert themselves as “assessment killjoys,” individuals who are openly and knowingly subverting the socialized norms of current assessment practices (p. 13).

In chapters 1 & 2, West-Puckett, Caswell, and Banks situate failing sideways as a queer-assessment practice by providing a brief history of assessments and their traditionally failure-oriented lenses. The authors provide a brief history of 20th and 21st century-era projects that were meant to “fix” public education. They point specifically to Bronwyn T. Williams’ (2007) claim, “[E]very

generation, upon reaching middle age, finds itself compelled to look at the literacy practices of young people and lament at how poor the work produced today is compared to that of idyllic days gone by” (p. 6). West-Puckett, Caswell, and Banks also provide a brief history of writing studies and its connection to movements that are “failure based or failure oriented” (p. 7). They call our attention to the fact that in our current educational system, we do things like “move up” through the grades toward graduation, and that lateral – or sideways – movements are seen as an avoidance or failure to do the thing we should be doing rather than as a way to engage with the goal or process in a different way, to approach it from a different angle (p. 24). Before ending the chapter, the authors leave us with a “How to Read This Book” section. Here they encourage readers to fail at the process of incorporating their suggestions, and they recommend that each time we fail, each time we move sideways instead of up or down, we engage with our own sideways paths with purpose and intentionality (p. 36).

West-Puckett, Caswell, and Banks continue to situate the conversation around the concept of validity. They point out that “success and failure are framed as individual rather than systemic issues: ‘my child is an honor student’; ‘my child is successful’ — not ‘the systems we’ve built create space for some to succeed at the expense of others’ failures” (p. 39). They remind us that early and accepted definitions of validity reside in the instrument itself rather than in the intentions of the users of the instruments, which is where they and others argue validity actually resides. West-Puckett, Caswell, and Banks argue that their Queer Validity Inquiry (QVI) model better aligns with this alternative framing of validity, moving it from the individual being assessed to the instrument being used for assessment (p. 42). They outline their vision of QVI as a methodology that uses four failure-oriented practices and asks the assessor to interact with their newly introduced assessment model, the QVI Pyraminx, to “uncover invisible ideological structures and to interrupt the linear lines and orientations” (p. 44).

Their multi-dimensional and interactive QVI Pyraminx asks the assessor and the assessed to manipulate the model and to use it with intentionality, choosing the specific lenses – affects, failures, identities, or materialities – and the affective values of the writing construct – success, failure, agency; commodity, affect, consent; reproduction, identities, radical justice; and mechanization, materiality, embodiment – through which they will approach a specific assessment instance. Essentially, they posit that their model not only

acknowledges the biases baked into the system, but demands that users actively and purposefully use the lenses to assess a piece of writing, and that choice must be made in each assessment instance.

In chapters 3 – 6, West-Puckett, Caswell, and Banks rotate their QVI Pyraminx to discuss this intentional approach to writing assessment. In this way, they “take this model out for a spin,” giving readers working examples of how to use this new model (p. 28). In chapter 3, the authors rotate the QVI Pyraminx to the lens of “failure” as a way to help readers envision how to decouple assessment from success narratives (p. 74). In chapter 4, they rotate it to the “affectivity” lens by illustrating how the “commodification” of writing assessment has framed writing as a set of skills to learn rather than the complicated, meaning-making process that it is (p. 108). In chapter 5, they use the “identity” lens to consider how “dissensus” and “radical justice” could be used as ways to understand the concepts of learning to write and writing to learn (p. 144). In chapter 6, the authors use the “materialities” lens to consider the concept of mechanization, of how traditional assessment models ignore process to focus on product. They write, “In these assessments, the students’ finished-for-now drafts . . . stand in as stable representations of students’ abilities as writers” (p. 183).

In each of these chapters, the authors provide well-constructed examples and anecdotes of their own experiences as students, educators, scholars, and administrators to highlight and support the arguments they are making. One of my favorites was the example of Stephanie West-Puckett’s development and use of an origami fortune-teller to engage research participants with their own writing-experience narratives in new and unique ways, rather than allowing them to rely on the stories they’d likely told many times before (p. 192). This exercise resonates so well with me because it recalls my own middle school days when we used to fold pieces of paper into intricate fortune-telling tools to see who we would marry or how many children we would have. This exercise also provides a very real and practical visual for how I, as a writing center director, could talk with my own writing tutors and with faculty on my campus, about the ways in which we already often manipulate assessment tools, like rubrics for example, to a specific end. Using a fortune-telling tool can serve as a tangible experience that can work to lead such conversations more fully into the realm of the QVI Pyraminx model West-Puckett, Caswell, and Banks are asking us to incorporate into our own practices.

The authors begin chapter 7 by acknowledging how significant a departure their QVI Pyraminx is from current practices. They write, “We recognize that engaging in queer validity inquiry will require a new or perhaps quite different emotional and mental labor from you. . . this can be big work; we won’t pretend otherwise” (p. 211). As a reader who is intrigued by this new model, I appreciate this straightforward approach, and I appreciate that they invite us to use our own judgement when adopting their QVI Pyraminx and to incorporate it as would work best for our own environments. Because this is so often a topic of discussion in writing center spaces, amongst directors and tutors, tutors and writers, and writers and instructors, I appreciate the authors’ call for readers to join them in identifying as “academic killjoys,” academics who work to disrupt practices that dehumanize both the assessed and the assessors. We are constantly working toward building writing and writing-assessment spaces on our campuses that recognize fully the humanness of writers and how individual each piece of writing is. True to what they have preached throughout this text, the authors end with a call not only to adopt and adapt but to also “extend, distend, and perhaps upend this constellation of practices we’ve traced out” (p. 223).

However, it must be noted that as of the publication of this book, all three authors were members of the professoriate, individuals who arguably possess more institutional social capital than those of us who are in “staff” roles. As a reader who is considered staff and not faculty, who sits in a relatively vulnerable position as the inaugural director and one-person team of a very small graduate writing support program, I could not help but feel as if such a radical approach, appealing as it might be, as right as it might sound, is not well-suited to those in roles such as mine. Often, staff members, whether we hold PhDs or not, are not looked to by faculty or administrators as experts in any field, and we are often not afforded the same kinds of protections from which faculty members benefit.

Thus, perhaps it falls on us to find a way not only to enact these practices outlined by our authors, but to encourage other staff, faculty members, and university administrators to read and discuss this text. Perhaps we cannot single-handedly change our institutions, but can we find a way to use this text to start the rumbles of revolution?

In *Failing Sideways: Queer Possibilities for Writing Assessment*, West-Puckett, Caswell, and Banks offer readers writing that is engaging and clear, arguments that are thoughtful and well-supported, and practices that could change how institutions see writing and writing assessment. What they offer is exciting and empowering. West-Puckett, Caswell, and Banks offer a model that has the potential to be applied in any situation, to be embraced by anyone who assesses or is assessed, and to be a place from which we can stand when we push for more humanizing practices in our institutions of higher education.

FOOTNOTES

[1] 2024 winner of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Lavender Rhetorics Award for Excellence in Queer Scholarship

[2] where a group or individual neither assimilates to nor directly opposes a dominant paradigm, but instead is “a strategy that works on and against a dominant ideology” from the inside

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